BASELINE
DETECTIVE AGENCY

Prologue

“Wait for it,” Kelly Uppleger said as the group gathered downtown, breath puffing in the chilly air.

Kevin cupped his warm coffee between his hands. “This is so exciting, Mrs. Uppleger.”

“I can hardly wait to see what surprise you have for us,” Jazmyn blurted.

“Okay, close your eyes, guys,” Kelly ordered.

Amy and Mimi covered theirs in unison, giggling. One by one, everyone else obeyed.

“Ready?” Kelly’s voice trembled with excitement. “Three… two… one!”

All eyes snapped open. Gasps burst out at once, echoing off the brick buildings. Eyes widened to the size of saucers as they took in the brand-new sign hanging over the once-vacant storefront.

BASELine Detective Agency

“Oh, my word. I love it,” Jazmyn said first, almost breathless.

“What do you guys think?” Kelly asked, unable to hide the grin spreading across her face.

“LOVE IT!” the group shouted in unison.

“You did it,” Ms. Brown said, stepping forward, tears shining in her eyes. “This has been your dream for years, and you finally did it. I am so proud of you.”

Mimi threw her arms around Kelly, and they hugged tightly.

“I couldn’t have done it without you guys,” Kelly admitted.

“We’re going to miss you so much. Kelly Walsh will not be the same without you,” Mrs. Grussendorf said, her voice tinged with sadness.

“Kelly Walsh won’t be the same without us,” Kelly replied.

The group exchanged puzzled looks. What on earth was she talking about? They had all worked at Kelly Walsh for the last three years in the same program together.

“This is our detective agency,” Kelly said.

“Ours?” Jazmyn repeated, stunned.

“Yes, ours,” Kelly confirmed. “It’s been my dream, but I want you all to be a part of it. I want to go into business with you guys. We work so well together, and I think it’s going to be so much fun.”

“I’m in!” Kevin said, jumping at the idea without even taking a moment to think.

“I would love to do it, but I just don’t know,” Amy said, hesitation in her voice. “The school offers stability… but the agency could offer so much more.”

“This could be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity,” Jazmyn cut in.

“It really could,” Mimi agreed. “And we do work well together.”

“I’m in,” Jazmyn said, a slow smile spreading across her face.

“Me too,” Amy added, more confident now.

“Mimi?” Kevin turned to her, almost pleading.

Mimi blew out a breath, then grinned. “Alright. I’m in.”

“Yes!” West shouted.

And just like that, it was decided. The agency was official.

“This is our detective agency,” Kelly said.

“Ours?” Jazmyn repeated, stunned.

“Yep,” Kevin added with a grin. “Guess we’re really covering all the bases now.”

Chapter 1

“Thank you, Mrs. Shipley. We’ll be there,” Mrs. Uppleger said into the phone. She hung up and turned to the group. They sat quietly, bright eyes with anticipation.

“Was that Erin Shipley from the NIC?” Mimi asked.

“Yes.” Kelly’s smile spread. “Guys, we have our first paid gig. It’s not a case, though—it’s security.”

“So, we’re there for security, not sleuth-curity?” Kevin said, grinning.

Groans and headshakes circled the room.

“Anyway,” Kelly went on, trying not to laugh, “the Nicolaysen is hosting a fundraising gala tomorrow night. They’re featuring an art piece on loan from the Ellison Western Art Foundation in Denver. It’s called *Last Light on the Platte*.”

“That painting was done by *the* Margaret Ellison,” Amy said, emphasizing the word.

“That’s right,” Kelly said. “And Allison Maluchnik, the NIC’s executive director, is nervous because the piece is insured for two million dollars. If anything happens to it, they’re liable.”

“Are we leading or assisting security detail?” Jazmyn asked.

“Assisting,” Kelly said. “Randy Erb, the grounds manager, is heading it up. He’s got cameras, angles, and blind spots mapped out. The piece will be the main attraction in the Founders Gallery.”

“We need to coordinate outfits,” Jazmyn said.

“I don’t know that it’s that big a deal,” Mimi said. “We always look good.”

“But for an event like this, we should all match,” Jazmyn insisted.

“Does everyone have black?” Kelly asked. “I want us to look business-appropriate.”

Kevin glanced around. “I’ve got black. It’s just usually a T-shirt with a band logo on it.”

“No logos,” Jazmyn said. “We’re going for ‘professional detectives,’ not ‘merch table roadies.’”

Amy laughed. “I’ve got a black blazer I never get to wear. This is as good an excuse as any.”

“Black dress, black flats,” Mimi said. “I’m ready.”

Kelly mentally checked them off and smiled. “Good. Tonight, we plan. Tomorrow, we protect a two-million-dollar painting.”

They arrived at 5 p.m., an hour and a half before the gala.

Randy met them at the door. “I’m so glad you could help out,” he said. “Sorry it was so last-minute. The insurance on this piece is what prompted the extra security.”

“How did you know to call us?” Kelly asked.

“One of our board members used to work at Kelly Walsh and heard you’d opened BASELine,” Randy said. “She thought you’d be perfect.”

“Who was it?” Amy asked.

“Marci Hayward. She said she used to work with Mr. West and trusted you all. The rest is history.”

Kevin grinned. “I love Ms. Marci. That was really kind of her.”

Randy led them into the Founders Gallery for a walkthrough, pointing out cameras, blind spots, and each person’s post. When he finished, Kelly gathered the group.

“This is going to be great, guys,” she said. “Few exits, lots of eyes. The gala runs from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m. We’ll stay until about nine to make sure everything’s secure after they lock up. You ready?”

“Ready!” they answered in chorus, grinning.

When the doors opened, a sizable crowd flowed in, drawn straight to the main attraction. Kevin took position at the main entrance. Amy stood in the main hallway before the turn toward the painting. Mimi and Kelly mingled near *Last Light on the Platte*, while Jazmyn covered the secondary exit. Other guards spread through the building, watching galleries and doors—a quiet net around the night’s star.

Dr. Lena Hart slipped beside Allison and the board as guests began filtering into the Founders Gallery.

“Allison, she looks stunning,” Lena said, eyes on the painting. “If the Ellison Foundation could see the lighting right now, they’d send us flowers.”

“One miracle at a time,” Allison replied. “Generous pledges first, flowers second.”

The board chair chuckled. “If this many people turned out just to stare at one painting, I’d say your exhibition plan is working, Dr. Hart.”

“It helps when the painting is insured for more than my house,” another board member murmured.

Lena’s smile tightened. “Which is why I keep reminding everyone: no drinks near the rope, no touching the frame, and no impromptu selfies with flying elbows.”

“That’s why we brought in extra security,” the chair said, nodding toward BASELine at their posts. “Discreet, local, and very motivated not to let anything happen on their first big job.”

“I’m grateful,” Lena said. “Just remember, if something does go wrong, the foundation will call me first, not you.”

“Nothing is going to go wrong,” Allison said. “You did your job with the art. Let the detectives do theirs. The board will worry about the donors.”

Lena exhaled and smoothed her dress. “Fine. I’ll go charm the donors. But if I see a champagne flute cross that line, I reserve the right to scream quietly on the inside.”

“That’s what a curator’s for,” the chair joked. “Protecting masterpieces—and our blood pressure.”

A trio of men stepped through the doors, pausing just inside. Their eyes swept the room—corners, ceiling, doorways.

“Three Caucasian males, about six feet,” West murmured into his radio. “One in jeans and a sport coat, two in suits. Just entered the main hall.”

“Got them,” Amy replied. From her post near the turn to the Founders Gallery, she watched them drift closer. She stepped forward with a polite smile.

“Good evening, gentlemen. How are you tonight?” she asked, friendly but neutral.

“We’re well,” said the man in the middle, the natural center of gravity. “I’m —”

“Mr. Carrington! I was hoping you’d bless us with your presence,” Erin Shipley called as she rounded the corner, all gala polish. “Some of the board members were asking about you. Come with me—I’d love to introduce you.”

The three men let themselves be swept along, Erin leading them to a knot of board members just inside the gallery.

“Guess who I ran into,” she announced.

“Tyler Carrington! How on earth are you doing?” Dr. Hunt exclaimed, shaking his hand. He tipped his head toward *Last Light on the Platte*, glowing under the lights. “Look at that piece. I imagine you’re a little jealous. I heard you missed out on it when it was for sale in Denver a couple of years ago.”

A flicker of regret—or irritation—crossed Tyler’s face before he smoothed it away.

“Well,” he said lightly, “some of us have to admire from a respectable distance.”

“Negative on the three men,” Kelly said quietly into the radio. “They’re clear. That’s Tyler Carrington—local art collector and owner of Platte Basin Energy.”

“Copy,” the team replied, one by one.

Around 7:30, the doors swung open again and a gust of cold air slipped into the lobby just ahead of Rowan Pike.

“Relax, Casper,” he announced, loud enough to turn heads. “The local talent has arrived.”

He shrugged out of a paint-smudged black coat, boots a little too shiny for his splattered jeans and scarf, and stretched his arms as if the NIC were his studio.

“Rowan,” Erin said, stepping forward with her gala smile. “So glad you could make it.”

“Oh, you know me,” he replied. “If there’s a two-million-dollar painting in the room, I like to be in the same tax bracket for at least an hour.”

A few board members chuckled uneasily. Dr. Hunt lifted an eyebrow. “We’re honored you’d grace us with your presence, Rowan.”

“Please,” Rowan said, hand over his heart. “I’m just here to see what kind of brushwork gets the full red-carpet treatment these days. Always good to check what I’m competing with.”

He nodded toward the Founders Gallery. “Is she in there? *Last Light on the Platte*? I should probably say hello before she remembers she got my wall space and my budget.

“Rowan,” Allison cut in smoothly, “you know exhibition funding is more complicated than that.”

“Of course it is,” he said. “It always is. Donors, foundations, insurance, catering—so many things between a painting and a wall.” He opened a hand toward the group. “Don’t worry, I’m only mildly bitter. Think of me as your color commentary.”

A couple of guests laughed. Even a guard smothered a smile.

Rowan dipped a half-bow. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go glare at Margaret Ellison’s clouds and pretend I’m above it all.”

He strode toward the gallery entrance, a little wake of attention following him.

“What just walked in?” Mrs. Bailey asked from her tucked-away corner.

“Rowan Pike just happened,” Mimi muttered. “I’ve heard so many stories. I didn’t think anyone could live up to them.”

Across the room, Allison intercepted Rowan again before he reached the painting.

“Rowan,” she said quietly, smile fixed. “I’m glad you’re here, but I need you to keep things civil tonight. Please. I know you’re still upset about the last gala.”

“Upset?” Rowan laughed softly. “Allison, I’m informed.” He flicked a glance at the painting. “You keep saying the NIC supports local artists but look around.”

He ticked names on his fingers. “Kaminski. Jiménez. Ralston. Peak. Kennedy. Kalanowski. Half the best artists in Casper only get wall space when the governor’s wife wants to feel ‘regional’ for an evening at the Ford Center.”

“That’s not fair,” Allison said, voice low. “We’ve shown all of them here. You know how tight our budget is. Loans like this keep donors and foundations interested so we can afford anything at all.”

“You’re chasing foundation money and wondering why local voices are getting quieter,” Rowan said. He leaned in slightly. “We’re the ones who built your reputation. The least you could do is stop treating us like filler between big-name loans.”

Allison’s smile flickered, then returned thinner. “We can talk about this after tonight. Right now, I need you to enjoy the gala, not start a debate in front of the donors.”

Rowan stepped back, palms up. “Fine. No debates. I’ll just stand over here and let Margaret Ellison’s clouds soak up all the love.”

He slipped toward the edge of the crowd.

Amy’s nerves hadn’t settled since his entrance. The hum of chatter barely covered the sound of her heels on the floor as she shifted position.

“Did you hear what happened last year?” a guard murmured as he passed her, eyes flicking toward Rowan. “He got so mad about where they hung his painting, he ‘accidentally’ set off the alarms and cleared half the gallery. Swore it was the wall’s fault.”

“Then we keep eyes on Mr. Pike,” Mrs. Grussendorf said crisply over comms. “No surprises this year.”

As attention tilted toward Rowan, the guard drifted away, vanishing between displays.

A faint voice hissed through his earpiece, just out of range of the detectives. “You’ve got their attention. Keep feeding them. Distract them.”

The guard nodded once and headed back into the crowd, checking in with Randy, who demanded an update every thirty minutes.

At the center of the exhibit, Rowan stood toeing the boundary tape, a glass of red trembling in his hand. Jazmyn watched him like a hawk. Amy took a position opposite her, their sightlines crossing the painting.

“I don’t think we should allow him that close, do you?” the guard said as she approached Jazmyn.

“We can’t step in unless he crosses the tape or the arts in danger,” Mrs. Bailey said evenly.

“What is going on over there?” the guard asked, a shade too loud.

Rowan’s voice rose over the murmur—loud, boastful. The wine arced a little too near the frame. Erin and Allison stiffened.

Kelly’s voice crackled through the comm. “Anyone got eyes on Randy?”

“I don’t see him,” Amy said.

“Me either,” Kevin added.

“Back corner, twenty feet from me,” Jazmyn replied.

“Bring him to me,” Kelly ordered. “Something’s off.”

“Secondary entrance is clear,” the guard whispered into her comm.

“Excellent,” came a calm male voice. A hint of drawl measured and cold. He held a silver-topped tube low at his side.

Carrington moved first, grabbing Rowan by the belt and hauling him back.

“Let go of me, you miscreant!” Rowan barked.

“You’re about to ruin the piece—and yourself,” Tyler hissed. “You’re spilling.”

Their standoff froze the room—wine trembling mid-glass, whispers rising.

Then Rowan’s expression shifted. The performance dropped. “You think this is about paint and wine?” he said, voice low. “They’re using me as cover.”

Tyler frowned. “What are you talking about?”

A metallic clang echoed from the corridor—sharp, deliberate. The gallery lights flickered once.

“Movement near the storage wing,” Jazmyn snapped into her earpiece.

Kelly’s reply came fast. “All units—lock it down.”

Chapter 2

All eyes flew to *Last Light on the Platte*. It still hung where it belonged, untouched. Kelly let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

Randy stepped into the center of the room and raised his voice. "Ladies and gentlemen, the Nicolaysen thanks you for your attendance. Considering this evening's events, we'll be closing the gala a bit early. Please make your way to the exits in an orderly fashion. Thank you again."

Kevin swung the front door open and guided guests out. Jazmyn secured her exit, turning patrons away with calm apologies. Kelly, Mimi, and Amy joined the other guards, forming a gentle funnel that steered the crowd into the night.

Within twenty minutes, the Founders Gallery stood silent and locked, the last echoes of conversation fading.

"Nothing to cause alarm," Kelly said the next morning, pinching the bridge of her nose, phone wedged to her ear. "We had a disturbance, ended the event early, cleared the Founders Gallery, secured the entrances. Headcount and logs matched. Nothing left the building that shouldn't have."

"You're sure?" Allison's voice crackled through.

"Most definitely," Erin added on speaker.

A soft knock at the open office door. A junior staffer leaned in. "Mrs. Maluchnik? Mrs. Ellison is here to pick up her piece."

Allison covered the receiver. "Give me five minutes."

The staffer hesitated. "She says it's urgent."

"What was that?" Allison asked.

"She says she needs to speak to you now," the staffer emphasized.

Allison forced her voice level again. "Mrs. Ellison's here for her painting. It's routine. I'll walk her through the release after we—"

A sharp voice cut in from the hall. "Excuse me. I need someone here. Now."

Allison’s head snapped up. “Kelly, hold on.” She set the phone down and crossed into the viewing room.

Mrs. Ellison stood over the uncrated painting, arms rigid at her sides, eyes locked on the canvas.

“Is there a problem?” Allison asked.

“I loaned you my life’s work,” Mrs. Ellison said, voice tight. “You return a counterfeit and expect me to smile and take it? I think not.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Allison replied. “Last night after we closed the gala, we removed the piece—that’s standard. It’s been in secure storage since.”

Mrs. Ellison lifted a gloved finger, tracing the air a few inches above the signature. “My framer and I argued for three days about this corner. There’s a hairline crack in the varnish that drove me insane.” Her gaze hardened. “It’s not here.”

Allison stepped closer. “You’re saying there’s a condition change? We can note—”

“I’m saying this is not my painting.” The words landed flat and cold. “The brushwork is wrong. The weight is wrong. The signature is trying too hard.”

Behind her, Erin’s voice rose faintly from the doorway. “What’s going on?”

“Erin,” Allison said, eyes still on the canvas, “we have a problem.”

“Define ‘problem,’” Erin managed.

“Mrs. Ellison believes her piece has been swapped for a fake.”

Silence settled over the room.

“Call Randy,” Allison added quietly. “Tell him we need to pull the camera footage. Then call Dr. Hunt and let him know we need him here. Now.”

Mrs. Ellison finally looked up, eyes bright. “This was my greatest work. My safety net. And now it’s gone.” Her voice broke on the last word.

Erin’s hand shook as she lifted her phone. “We were looking in the wrong places,” she whispered, more to herself than anyone.

She pressed call. The line rang once, twice.

“Come on, Randy,” she said under her breath. “Tell me you saw something we didn’t.”

Chapter 3

Dr. Hunt arrived beside himself. “Allison, why the urgency?”

“The piece was swapped sometime during the night. When Mrs. Ellison came to pick it up today, she noticed. Now she is demanding insurance payment.” Allsion said frantically.

What was the name of the group that you hired for the gala last night?” Dr. Hunt asked inquisitively.

“The BASELine Detective Agency.” Allison replied.

“Get them on the phone. We need to get this cleaned up quickly before Oil City News gets involved. This could hurt the reputation of the NIC permanently.” he said.

“I’m on it.”

“We’ve gone over the video multiple times,” Randy said. “At 7:12, the camera angle shifts. Someone moved it on purpose.”

“Can the camera be moved remotely?” Kelly asked.

“Yes,” Randy replied. “But no one had any reason to be in the office to move it… at least, not officially.”

“Who has access?”

“Me, Ann, and Geoff.” He hesitated just a fraction on Ann’s name.

“Any ideas?” Kelly pressed.

“Geoff was stationed in the McMurry Gallery, which connects to Founders through the door Mrs. Bailey was posted at,” Randy said. “Ann was in the Founders Gallery, at the back corner across from Mrs. Grussendorf. I was rotating between the four main galleries until Rowin caused his ridiculous scene.”

“Remind me,” Kelly said, “how long did that scene last?”

“Too long,” Randy muttered. “Everyone in the room was watching him. Even Ann left her spot for a moment to see what was going on.”

Kelly’s gaze sharpened. “Then we may be looking at a coordinated theft. One person to move the camera, one to distract the gala, and one to swap the painting. Rowan’s outburst, Ann leaving her post, and that camera shift all happening within minutes… that’s not nothing.”

“Let’s call Ann and talk to her first, see what she has to say,” Allison said. “I’ll get ahold of Rowan and let him know he’s under suspicion. That should either bring him in fast or make him run.”

“Does anyone know the man who came in with the tube, dressed in western wear?” Kelly asked.

“Matt Melnar,” Erin said. “He’s a local artist who’s been trying to get one of his pieces displayed. He said he had it in the tube.”

“If you’d like, I can contact my team and go over the timeline with them, see what they think,” Kelly offered.

“Please, Kelly,” Allison said. “I’m glad you were there last night. I believe it will help us solve this case faster.”

As Kelly got into her car, she called Mimi and asked her to get hold of the team. She told Mimi they needed to meet at the office at 1 p.m., shared the key details, and stressed that their collaboration was essential.

The conference room still smelled faintly of coffee and printer toner when Kelly walked in, case file under her arm. The others were already there, waiting.

“Thanks for coming in on short notice,” Kelly said, taking her seat. “The Nicolaysen lost a high-value piece last night. Right now, we have two people who stand out: Rowan and Ann. The gallery thinks this was at least a three-person job and I do as well.”

Mimi slid a legal pad toward the center of the table. “Let’s start with what we actually know,” she said. “The camera angle changes at 7:12. Rowan makes a scene during the gala. Ann leaves her assigned position, even briefly. Those are facts. Everything else is a hypothesis.”

“So, two suspects and one ghost,” Kevin said. “I’m guessing the ghost is the person we haven’t identified yet.”

“Or the person nobody wants to notice,” Amy added. “People talk about the loud idiot and the pretty guard. They don’t always notice the quiet one doing the real work.”

Jazmyn frowned thoughtfully. “If there were three of them, it kind of makes sense,” she said. “Rowan gets everyone looking at him, Ann’s post is left weak for a minute, and someone else uses that moment to actually grab the painting.”

“Exactly,” Kelly said. “Right now, that’s our working model: distraction, weak point, and thief. But we only have two names to plug into three roles.”

Mimi tapped her pen. “We should be careful not to lock in on them too fast,” she said. “They’re suspicious because their actions line up with the theft, but that doesn’t prove intent. Still, they’re the ones we start with.”

“So, what’s first?” Kevin asked. “Interviews, video, or angry phone calls?”

“Video and placement,” Kelly replied. “We rebuild the timeline from the moment guests arrived to the moment the theft was discovered. Where Rowan was, where Ann was, who could reach the office to move that camera. No assumptions without timestamps.”

Amy nodded. “And when we talk to them, we keep it simple,” she said. “Where were you, what did you see, who were you with. If they’re lying, it’ll crack later when we compare it to the footage.”

Jazmyn looked up. “Do we tell them they’re suspects?”

“With Rowan, yes—he’s already drawn attention to himself,” Kelly said. “With Ann, we keep it low-key. She’s security; if she’s innocent, we need her cooperation. If she’s not, she’ll tell us more by what she avoids than by what she says.”

Jazmyn looked thoughtful. “What about the cowboy with the tube? Matt Melnar. If he wanted his art on the wall that badly, maybe swapping pieces wasn’t such a crazy idea for him.”

“Good,” Kelly said. “He’s our potential fourth. Either he’s a distraction, or he’s a decoy. We don’t know which yet.”

Kevin let out a soft whistle. “Sounds like we’ve got just enough to be dangerous.”

“Enough to get started,” Kelly corrected. “Mimi, you and I will go through the video again. Amy, pull everything the gallery has on staff assignments from last night. Jazmyn, go over the guest list and flag anyone with a reason to care about that painting. Kevin, be ready to talk to Rowan once we call him in.”

He grinned. “So, charm the loudmouth. Got it.”

Kelly closed the file. “We don’t know who the third person is yet,” she said. “But if there were three, they left a pattern. Our job is to find it—starting with Rowan and Ann. After that, we look at Matt.”

Mimi tapped her pen against the table. “If they’re working together, they slipped somewhere. Coordinated plans leave messy edges.”

Kelly stood, chair scraping softly on the floor. “Then let’s go tug at the edges,” she said. “Rowan Pike gets the first call.”

Chapter 4

“This is ridiculous,” Rowan spat, sitting stiffly in the conference room chair. Kevin sat across from him, notes in front of him; Amy leaned against the wall, legal pad in hand.

“This is all Allison Maluchnik,” Rowan went on. “I made her look stupid last night, and now she’s got it in for me. She has her ‘reputation’ to protect, so they’re going to look for the easy scapegoat and dump everything on him.”

“Rowan, you have to admit you set yourself up,” Kevin said. “You walked into the gala and made a spectacle of yourself. You pulled every pair of eyes in the room. Then there’s a theft. Of course you’re a suspect. You were really good at getting everyone to focus on you—something I *try* to do on stage doing standup and still don’t always pull off.”

Rowan glared at him. “So, this is a joke to you?”

Kevin shook his head. “No. But you need to understand why you’re in this chair before you can convince anyone you don’t belong here. So, start convincing. Walk me through your night, start to finish. When did you arrive, and what did you do first?”

Rowan blew out a breath. “Fine. I got there late on purpose. I was already mad. Allison keeps bringing in these outside artists while there are plenty of good local ones she overlooks.”

“Because local artists don’t pay to keep the lights on,” Kevin said, gently. “The NIC needs big-ticket pieces to keep donation dollars rolling. You know it’s not personal.”

“It feels personal,” Rowan shot back. “My plan was to go in and ruin the gala. I wanted to cause such a scene where people would feel uncomfortable and leave. I had no idea I was playing into the thieves’ hands.”

Amy finally stepped in, voice calm. “When you say, ‘ruin the gala,’ what does that mean exactly?” she asked. “Raise your voice? Walk too close to the painting? Did you ever touch the rope or the frame?”

“No,” Rowan said quickly. “I got close, sure. I wanted them nervous. But I never crossed the tape, and I never touched the painting.”

“And during the moment Tyler pulled you back,” Amy continued, “did anyone bump into you? Brush passed you? Did you see *anyone* step between you and the painting?”

Rowan frowned, replying to it. “I saw phones out. I heard someone behind me laugh. And the guard—the woman—she said something about me being too close. But nobody touched me. Tyler just grabbed my belt and dragged me back like I was about to tackle the thing.”

Kevin nodded. “So, your goal was attention, not theft. You wanted to embarrass the museum, not walk out with a rolled-up canvas.”

“Exactly,” Rowan said. “If I’d known someone was using me as a distraction, I’d have charged them for the performance.”

Ann sat down, Kelly and Jazmyn facing her across the table. She tugged once at her NIC badge lanyard, then folded her hands tightly.

“What is this about?” Ann asked. “Did something happen at the NIC last night?”

“Funny you should ask,” Kelly said. “*Last Light on the Platte* was stolen during the gala.”

“What?” Ann jerked forward in her chair. “You don’t think I had anything to do with that.”

“We think your name keeps coming up in the wrong places,” Jazmyn said. “You came to us with information that pulled focus, and you were seen leaving your post during the window when the camera angle changed.”

Ann shook her head quickly. “I was just doing my job. I saw Rowan acting like a maniac, and I thought you needed to know. That’s all.”

“You left your assigned corner in Founders,” Kelly said. “How long were you away from your spot?”

“A minute. Maybe two.” Ann’s eyes slid away. “It wasn’t that long.”

“Randy says you were gone closer to five,” Jazmyn said quietly. “Long enough for someone to move a camera and stand where only you were supposed to be.”

Ann’s jaw tightened. “Randy’s the one who kept disappearing. Every time I looked for him, he was ‘checking another gallery.’ Maybe ask him where *he* was.”

“We are,” Kelly said. “But right now we’re asking you. Where exactly did you go when you left your post?”

“I told you,” Ann said. “I stepped out to see what was going on with Rowan. People were getting nervous. I wanted to make sure things didn’t get out of hand.”

“And in that time,” Jazmyn said, “no one was watching the back corner of Founders. The exact corner you were assigned.”

“I came right back,” Ann insisted. “The painting was fine. You can see it on the video.”

Kelly held her gaze. “We did. We also saw the 7:12 camera shift. That control can only be moved from the security office. You’re one of three people with access.”

Color drained slightly from Ann’s face, then rushed back. “I never touched that console last night,” she said. “I don’t even like going in there alone. Ask Randy, he hovers over those monitors like they’re his kids.”

“We will,” Kelly said. “But someone moved that camera. And while Rowan had the room’s attention, you weren’t where you were supposed to be, and the one angle on *Last Light on the Platte* went blind.”

Ann swallowed. “You think I did this.”

“I think,” Kelly said calmly, “that if you didn’t, you’re one of the few people who can help us figure out who used your absence to their advantage.”

Jazmyn leaned in a little. “And if you’re covering for someone, Ann, this is the part where you decide if they’re worth taking the fall for.”

Ann’s fingers tightened around her lanyard until her knuckles blanched. “I’m not covering for anyone,” she said, but her voice had lost its earlier certainty. “I was just trying to keep the gala from blowing up. That’s it.”

Kelly let the silence stretch for a beat. “Then you won’t mind going back over your timeline again,” she said. “Minute by minute.”

Mimi moved slowly around the gallery, eyes scanning for anything that didn't belong.

"There has to be a clue here somewhere," she murmured.

She paused at the center where *Last Light on the Platte* had hung for only four hours. All that attention, all that money—for something that now might not even be real. She followed the rope line around the empty space, studying the floor, the stanchions, the base of the wall. Nothing.

She was about to give up when something caught her eye.

"What is this?" she whispered.

Squatting down, she leaned closer. Caught in a hairline crack between tiles was a short strand of course, dark fiber with a faint metallic sheen—nothing like the fabrics from gala dresses and suits.

Mimi slipped tweezers from her pocket, carefully snagged the fiber, and dropped it into a waiting evidence bag.

"Very interesting," she said softly, sealing it. Looking around the gallery, "Let's see what else you have to offer."

"Let's start at the beginning. When did you arrive?" Kevin asked.

"Six-thirty," Rowan said.

Amy, seated to Kevin's right with a legal pad, made a quick note. "Guest list puts you on the check-in sheet at 6:32," she said. "So that tracks."

"But you didn't enter the Founders Gallery until seven-thirty," Kevin went on, tone steady. "So, what were you doing for that hour? Meeting with anyone? Coordinating your big entrance so the cameras could be moved and the painting swapped?"

Rowan's gaze flicked around the room before he came back to Kevin. "No. And this stays in this room." He exhaled hard. "I was doing lines in the bathroom, trying to work up the nerve to make a complete jackass of myself and embarrass Allison."

Amy's pen paused for half a second, then moved again. "Which bathroom?" she asked. "Downstairs by the lobby, or the one off the McMurry Gallery?"

"The one by McMurry," Rowan said. "Quieter."

“Did anyone go in or out while you were there?” Amy asked.

“A couple of guys washed their hands and left. Nobody I know. Nobody who talked to me.”

Kevin nodded once. “When Randy cleared the gallery, when did you leave and where did you go?”

“I lingered for a bit,” Rowan said. “I knew I was the reason the gala was over.” He gave a humorless little laugh. “When he saw me, he walked over, grabbed my arm, and escorted me out.”

Amy glanced up. “So, you left with Randy? No detours? No stops in another gallery?”

“Straight out the front,” Rowan said. “He didn’t exactly give me room for a farewell tour.”

“Rowan, we’re going to need to look through your phone,” Kevin said. “We have to confirm who you called and when and see if there’s any pattern with the people we’re looking at. If everything lines up, it helps us clear you.”

“Not without a warrant,” Rowan snapped.

“The NIC is already moving in that direction,” Kevin said. “A two-million-dollar piece goes missing, the police get involved. They’re going to want to eliminate suspects, same as we are. We just got to you first. You’ll probably hear from them later today or tomorrow at the latest.”

Rowan’s shoulders sagged. “Okay, fine,” he muttered, pulling his phone from his pocket and sliding it across the table.

“Thank you,” Kevin said. “Amy will go through it with you, so you can confirm what’s there. If it all checks out, it goes a long way toward ruling you out.”

Amy drew the phone closer. “We’re looking for timing,” she said. “Texts, calls, anything around that seven-o’clock window. If your story lines up with your phone, we’ll note that in our report.”

Rowan leaned back, eyes on the ceiling. “For the record,” he said, voice quieter now, “I wanted to ruin a party, not a painting. There’s a difference.”

Amy’s pen tapped once against the pad. “We’ll see if your phone agrees with you,” she said, not unkindly.

Mimi straightened, ready to write the gallery off as having nothing else for her—then something glinted at the edge of her vision.

Near a door marked *Employees Only*, a small scrap of silver cardboard lay half-tucked against the jamb, as if it had been kicked there and forgotten. She pulled a fresh evidence bag from her pocket and tugged on a glove.

“Hello,” she murmured.

Careful not to brush the surface, Mimi pinched the scrap between her fingers and lifted it. Up close, she could see a curved edge and a sliver of a printed logo—just enough ink and shape to prove it had once been part of something cylindrical, like an art tube or case, not ordinary packaging.

She slid it into the bag and sealed it. “First a mystery fiber,” she said under her breath, “now a broken label by the staff door. Someone’s been back here—and they didn’t clean up as well as they thought.”

She turned the bag in her hand, studying the curve of the cardboard and the ghost of the logo.

“A silver tube, half a label, right by the employee door,” Mimi murmured. “Looks like Mr. ‘I-brought-my-art-just-in-case’ has some explaining to do.”

She wrote one name across the top of the bag in neat block letters: MATT MELNAR.

Ann sat across from Jazmyn and Kelly, her unlocked phone resting on the table between them.

“Okay,” Jazmyn said gently, sliding the phone a little closer. “We’re just going to scroll through your recent calls and texts from last night. I’ll read the names; you tell me who they are. If anything looks odd, we’ll pause and talk. Sound fair?”

Ann folded her arms, then slowly nodded. “I guess I don’t have much choice.”

“You do,” Kelly said. “You came in. You’re sitting here. That’s a choice—and it already helps your case.”

Jazmyn tapped the screen. “All right, from six to eight p.m. yesterday—who’s ‘Rach’?”

“My sister,” Ann said. “She was asking what time the gala ended so she could pick me up if I was too tired to drive.”

“Nice sister,” Jazmyn said, a faint smile tugging at her mouth. She flicked to the next line. “Group text: ‘NIC Security.’ Just shift updates?”

“Yeah. Randy sent assignments around five-thirty. I just replied, ‘Got it.’”

“Okay.” Jazmyn glanced up at her. “If you were helping steal a two-million-dollar painting, you’d probably use something a little less obvious than the work group chat, right?”

A reluctant huff escaped Ann. “I’m not helping steal anything. Period.”

“Good,” Kelly said. “Then this should be quick.” She nodded to Jazmyn.

“No calls between seven and eight,” Jazmyn murmured after another swipe. “That matches what you told us earlier—no phone use once the gala was underway.”

Ann shifted into her chair. “So, if it all matches, do I stop being your prime suspect?”

“You stop being easy to blame,” Kelly said. “That’s a start.”

Jazmyn softened her voice. “Look, if there’s something you’re worried will look bad but isn’t about the theft—personal stuff, whatever—tell us now so we don’t trip over it later.”

Ann stared at the table. “Like what?”

“Like a fight with someone, or a secret relationship, or a habit that makes you disappear at the wrong time,” Jazmyn said. “Things that make people jump to the wrong conclusions.”

After a long beat, Ann shook her head. “No. Just me, my job, and a ruined gala.”

Jazmyn locked the phone and slid it back across the table. “For now, your phone agrees with you,” she said. “And phones are terrible liars.”

That drew the smallest smile from Ann. “So, I can go?”

“Yes,” Kelly said. “But stay close. If we clear you completely, everyone’s going to want to tell you how they ‘always knew’ you were innocent.”

Ann stood, lanyard twisting between her fingers, and left the room—leaving Kelly and Jazmyn alone with the uneasy feeling that, clear or not, they still hadn’t heard everything.

Jazmyn stepped out of the interview room, closing the door softly behind her.

“Anything?” Kelly asked.

“They’re both squeaky clean,” Jazmyn said, frustration edging her voice. “I really thought we’d get something from one of them. They seemed so obvious.”

“That’s the problem,” Kelly said. “It’s almost never the obvious ones.”

Jazmyn glanced toward the evidence table, where a small bag held a dark fiber and another held the torn silver label.

“Then whoever planned this,” she said quietly, “is still out there—and they’re smarter than we gave them credit for.”

Kelly’s gaze followed hers to the bags. “Which means,” she replied, “the real trouble is just getting started.”

Chapter 5

As the team gathered around the conference table the following morning, Mrs. Uppleger began the debriefing on the previous day's events.

"Ann remains on the list of suspects," Kelly reported. "What about Rowan?"

"After reviewing his actions and their impact, I don't believe he was involved," Kevin replied.

"I think his timing was just an unfortunate coincidence," Amy remarked with a smirk.

"He'd be a distraction anywhere," Kelly added with a laugh.

"Did you bring in Matt Melnar?" Mimi asked. "Based on some of the evidence I recovered yesterday, he needs to be questioned at the very least."

Mimi then presented the items she'd found—a piece of fabric and a fragment of cardboard. The group began discussing possible sources of the fabric, analyzing texture and appearance, while Kelly noted that the cardboard fragment needed to be traced back to Mr. Melnar for confirmation.

Kelly reviewed her notes, then spoke. "Melnar, Carrington, and Dr. Hart are on the interview list for today," she said, adding Matt Melnar's name to her legal pad. "Mimi, proceed with a forensic examination of the cardboard. Document any markings and determine what they may correspond to."

"Understood," Mimi replied, standing and exiting the room.

"I am keeping the same team configuration as yesterday," Kelly continued. "Amy and Kevin, you will conduct the interview with Melnar. Jazmyn and I will interview Dr. Hart first and then Mr. Carrington. We will reconvene here at 2 o'clock to review findings and assess next steps."

As Mimi held the piece under the microscope, she noticed the partial name "ton gal". Her eyes got wide. She quickly got up and started searching on the internet. After typing information in and waiting the screen started filling with information. As Mimi read, her eyes got wider. "I don't believe it." She said at the screen. "This is getting very interesting."

"Hello. Dr. Rhoden, please." She said into the phone tapping her fingernails on the table as she waited. "Dr. Rhoden, this is Mimi Brown. I dropped off the

fabric piece late yesterday afternoon. I was wondering if you have found out anything yet?" Pulling a note pad over and picking up a pen she began to write, "Uh huh, yes, okay, thank you Dr. Rhoden. I appreciate you moving this to priority. You are the best. Bye."

As she lifted the pad, she reread what she just jotted down.

"This isn't a work glove. It's a women's lambskin evening glove with a satin knit lining; the type sold in boutique accessory shops. The sizing and style strongly suggest it belongs to a woman. I must get this information to Kelly ASAP. This will help as they interrogate."

"Dr. Hart, thank you for meeting with us," Kelly began. "This interview will focus on the events surrounding the missing artwork. You are not under arrest, but the information you provide is part of an active investigation. Do you understand?"

After Dr. Hart confirmed, Kelly continued.
"For the record, please state your full name, role, and how long you've been employed here."

"Describe your responsibilities as curator, particularly in relation to the pieces featured at last night's gala." She shared.

"What was your involvement in planning the event and deciding which works would be displayed?" She shared.

"Who else had authority to change displays, move pieces, or access secure storage?"

"Mrs. Mulnichek, Mrs. Shipley, and Dr. Hunt are the only three besides me," she said.

There was a knock at the door before it opened and an officer stepped in, drawing Mrs. Uppleger's attention.

"Is there a problem?" Kelly asked.

"No, ma'am," he replied quickly. "There's a Mimi Brown on the phone for you. She says it's urgent."

"Jazmyn, take over for me, please," Kelly said, rising from her chair. "I'll be right back."

“Matt Melnar,” Amy said as she shook his hand. “I’m Amy Grussendorf, and this is Kevin West. We have a few questions about the gala at the Nicolaysen.”

Matt’s answers were brief, giving only what he needed to.

“Why were you carrying an art tube?” Kevin asked.

“A drawing tube.” He said in a disrespectful tone. “I was delivering blueprints for Tyler Carrington,” Matt replied. “I work for Carrington Preferred Contractors. We’re developing a project in Blackmore.”

“Why bring them to a gala?” Amy pressed. “Wouldn’t that be handled at the office?”

“He said he couldn’t wait,” Matt replied. “I finished the plans after hours and texted him. He told me he’d be at the NIC and asked if I could drop them off there, so I agreed.

“When did all this transpire?” Amy asked, leaning forward.

“I don’t know,” Matt said, irritation edging into his voice. “I didn’t realize the exact time was going to be a federal case.”

“Any idea at all?” Amy persisted. “You must have seen the time when you left work, when you arrived at the event, or even when you left. Approximately what time was it? Did you hand Carrington the drawing tube and leave right away, or did you stay and look around?”

Matt’s jaw tightened. “I was working late, I finished, I dropped off the tube. That’s it. I’m not sitting there memorizing timestamps every time I turn the key in the ignition.”

The interview room door opened. Mrs. Uppleger stepped in, a file folder in hand, her expression hard.

“Mr. Melnar,” she said evenly, taking a seat across from him, “we’ve had the fragment from the tube recovered at the Nicolaysen examined. It matches the manufacturer and dimensions of the architectural tube you were carrying that night, right down to the tear pattern at the edge of the cap.”

Matt shifted in his chair but said nothing.

“So, let’s try this again,” Mrs. Uppleger continued. “Exactly when did you arrive at the NIC with that tube? Who, if anyone, did you speak with before

you found Carrington? And at what point did that tube stop being in your direct possession?”

He stared at the table.

“Did you at any time set the tube down unattended? Did anyone else handle it? Because right now, the only person we can place with a matching tube at the scene is you.”

Matt’s voice rose. “You’re twisting this. I brought blueprints, that’s all. I did a favor for my boss, and now you’re trying to hang this whole thing on me because of a stupid tube?”

“We’re ‘hanging’ something on you,” Mrs. Uppleger said, her tone still controlled, “because the physical evidence connects your tube to the scene and your timeline doesn’t add up. So, you need to start being precise. Times. Locations. Who saw you. Who could confirm your story.”

Matt glared at her. “Maybe ask Carrington.”

“We’ll speak with Mr. Carrington,” she replied. “Right now, we’re speaking with you. Last chance, Matt: walk us through the evening again, this time with details we can verify.”

His chair scraped back an inch as he shifted, anger flashing across his face. “You know what? I’m done answering questions.”

“Matt—” Amy began.

“No,” he cut in sharply. “I want a lawyer.”

Chapter 6

The team sat around the conference table, reviewing everything they had so far.

“Mr. Melnar had a drawing tube that matches the fragment we recovered,” Kelly said.

“But he definitely doesn’t wear women’s lambskin gloves,” Mimi countered.

“Could the person carrying the tube also be the one wearing the gloves,” Kevin asked, “or are we looking at two different individuals? Those pieces were found in two very different areas.”

“Mr. Carrington’s connection to Matt, as his employer, feels a little too convenient,” Jazmyn added. “I don’t trust either of them.”

“Trust is one factor,” Kelly said. “Another is who stands to gain the most and has the least to lose.”

“Mrs. Margaret Ellison,” Mimi blurted.

“That fits,” Amy agreed. “She collects the insurance payout and keeps the real piece. No one would ever know.”

“Mimi, dig into Mrs. Ellison’s finances,” Kelly directed. “See if she’s under pressure. Desperate people do desperate things. Was she desperate enough to steal her own piece for the insurance money?”

“Jazmyn, call Allison and confirm whether two million dollars in coverage is excessive for that artwork or within the normal range.”

“Amy, get in touch with Carrington Preferred Contractors. Find out if they have the blueprints Matt claims he delivered to Mr. Carrington.”

She paused, then looked at Kevin. “And Kevin, go to Starbucks and get everyone their usual.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the team answered in unison—though Kevin’s response came with a hint of disappointment.

Amy pulled into the lot at Carrington Preferred Contractors. Only a handful of vehicles were scattered near the entrance. The emptiness made her uneasy; she needed answers, not a locked door and a “closed” sign.

Inside, a receptionist looked up as Amy approached the desk. “Can I help you?” the woman asked.

“Yes. I’m Amy Grussendorf with BASELine Detective Agency,” Amy said, showing her credentials. “I’m following up on some blueprints Mr. Carrington picked up a few nights ago.”

“And what is this regarding, if you don’t mind my asking?” the receptionist said, her tone polite but cautious.

“We’re working to eliminate a few people from our list of suspects,” Amy replied.

The receptionist nodded, then pressed a button on the phone. “Mr. Carrington, there’s a Ms. Grussendorf here to see you,” she said, pausing. “I’ll send her back. Thank you, sir.”

Amy stepped through the doorway into a well-appointed office. “Mr. Carrington, thank you for seeing me.”

“My pleasure,” Tyler said, rising and extending his hand.

She shook it and took the chair opposite his desk.

“What do I owe the pleasure?” he asked.

“We’re looking into the blueprints that Mr. Melnar brought you the night of the event,” Amy said. “We didn’t have the chance to review them then. I’d like to see them now, just to verify his statement.”

“Of course,” Tyler replied easily. “They’re right over here.”

He crossed to a side conference table where a large set of plans lay spread out, corners pinned by paperweights. Amy joined him, leaning over the drawings. Years of helping her grandfather build barns and additions on the farm had made schematics feel like a second language. The lines made sense. The name at the top made her stop.

Ellison & Associates.

She straightened slightly. “Ellison & Associates,” she read aloud. “What kind of business is this?”

“It’s a land development enterprise,” Tyler said. “Mrs. Ellison called me a couple of weeks ago. She’d just closed a deal that made her a substantial profit and wanted to invest in a solid project. I shared some of my

experience, and we came up with this development. I think she'll be very pleased. I've already connected her with a few of my associates."

Amy nodded, keeping her expression neutral. "Thank you, Mr. Carrington. I appreciate your time."

"You're welcome," he said with a practiced smile. "Happy to help."

Outside, Amy slid behind the wheel of her car and closed the door, letting the quiet settle around her. Ellison & Associates. A fresh, lucrative deal. New development plans in Casper. And a supposedly "devastating" loss of a multimillion-dollar painting.

"Lots of money coming in," she murmured to herself, gripping the steering wheel. "And even more if the insurance pays out."

She started the engine but didn't put the car in gear. One thought rose above the others, sharp and clear:

If that last deal left Mrs. Ellison sitting on fresh money, why make her own painting vanish—unless the insurance payout was never a safety net, but the seed money for this entire development?

Amy reached for her phone.

"I think we just found out what Mrs. Ellison really stands to gain," she said as the line began to ring—unaware that, at that exact moment back at the office, Mimi was opening a file that could blow Ellison & Associates wide open.

Chapter 7

Mimi laid the file on the table and stood standing, one hand on the folder like she needed the contact to steady herself.

“Okay,” Kelly said, glancing around the conference room. “You said this couldn’t wait. What have you got on Ellison & Associates?”

“It’s not just a company,” Mimi said. “It’s the motive.”

Rowan leaned forward, chair creaking. “Walk us through it.”

Mimi opened the folder and fanned out several pages so everyone could see. “This is the insurance file on the stolen painting. Two million in coverage—recently increased at Mrs. Ellison’s request. And this”—she tapped a second stack— “is the financial profile on Ellison & Associates. Newly formed LLC. No history. But look at this line.”

Kelly squinted. “Anticipated funds?”

“High six figures,” Mimi said. “Linked directly to an active insurance claim. The same policy on the painting. And here”—she slid over a development proposal— “are their projected land costs. They line up almost exactly with the expected payout.”

“So, she loses a painting,” Rowan said slowly, “and a brand-new company just happens to be waiting for the money?”

“Not ‘happens,’” Mimi said. “She built it that way. First, she bumps the coverage. Then she quietly forms Ellison & Associates. Then the gala, the theft, the claim. She’s not covering a loss. She’s seeding a project.”

There was a beat of silence.

Kelly’s voice dropped. “That’s a hell of an allegation, Mimi. Circumstantial, so far.”

“Then let’s add the circumstances,” Mimi replied. She flipped to the email logs. “Weeks before the gala, Mrs. Ellison is in regular contact with Tyler Carrington. Subject lines: investment discussion,’ ‘potential partnership,’ ‘capital structure.’ They’re not chatting about art appreciation. They’re building the deal that Ellison & Associates exists to run.”

The door opened halfway through her sentence. Amy slipped inside, cheeks flushed from the cold, clutching a tablet.

“Sorry, traffic,” Amy said. “Did I miss—”

“Perfect timing,” Kelly said. “We’re talking Ellison & Associates.”

Amy’s expression brightened with a grim kind of satisfaction. “Then you’re going to like what I brought.”

Mimi gestured to the empty chair beside her. “Jump in. I’m at the ‘she stole her own painting’ part.”

Rowan’s eyebrows shot up. “We’re there already?”

Amy set her tablet on the table and brought up a photograph—an architectural blueprint header from Carrington Preferred, Ellison & Associates printed along the top in clean, confident type.

“This is the document I photographed in Carrington’s office,” Amy said. “Land development for the same parcel the financials reference. It’s dated before the gala. Before the theft. The project was never contingent on whether the painting went missing. It was contingent on when the claim paid out.”

“So, they were counting on the insurance money before the crime even happened,” Kelly said.

“Exactly,” Amy said. “Carrington’s firm was ready to move the moment the funds hit. I also pulled calendar metadata off his email. He and Mrs. Ellison had blocked off a meeting the morning after the gala labeled ‘finalization.’ That meeting disappeared from his calendar log the day after the theft report went public.”

“Deleted,” Mimi said. “Right when ‘poor Mrs. Ellison’ was crying to the adjuster.”

“And there’s the physical evidence,” Amy added, swiping to another image. “Lab found trace from a high-end women’s lambskin evening glove on the frame. That narrows it to a pretty specific demographic. Combine that with the security footage from the gala—Mrs. Ellison’s partner is on camera next to the painting during Rowan’s distraction, gloved hand on the frame.”

Rowan winced. “You’re saying my little ‘make the donor laugh’ routine was the cover.”

“Someone needed eyes away from the wall,” Mimi said. “You provided that. Her partner provided access. Mrs. Ellison provided the plan and the payout.”

Kelly leaned back, arms folded, letting the pieces settle. “So, let’s lay this out like a jury would hear it.”

Mimi nodded. “Financial motive: she increases the insurance value shortly before the theft and creates a shell company with no assets but a development plan that matches the claim number. Means: her circle has the money and sophistication to move a high-value piece without a trace, and we have glove trace and positioning on camera. Opportunity: her partner is right there during the only gap in surveillance, the exact window when the painting disappears.

“And intent,” Amy said. “Documented in her own paper trail. She and Carrington structure an entire development around cash that doesn’t exist yet, then immediately file a claim when the painting ‘vanishes.’”

Rowan let out a low breath. “She never planned to get the painting back.”

“She never lost it,” Mimi said. “She repositioned it. Took it off the books while turning it into liquid capital to build Ellison & Associates.”

Kelly studied them both. “You’re sure you want to put this in front of the police?”

“Yes,” Mimi said, without hesitation.

Amy nodded. “We don’t just have a theory. We have timing, money, documents, and physical trace that all tell the same story.”

Rowan glanced at the photo of the smiling patron they had all felt so sorry for. “So, our ‘victim’,” he said quietly, “built her empire on a fake crime.”

Mimi closed the folder and slid it toward Kelly. “She’s not the victim. She’s the thief. And if we move fast, we can make sure the payout that was supposed to build Ellison & Associates never lands in her account.”

Kelly stood, taking the file. “All right. We went to the police. Next stop: showing Mrs. Ellison exactly how much we know.”

Chapter 8

The interview room was small enough that Mrs. Ellison’s perfume reached them before her words did.

She sat with her hands folded on the metal table, posture perfect, a silk scarf bright against the gray cinderblock walls. When the door opened and Kelly stepped in with Mimi, Amy, and Kevin behind the detective, Mrs. Ellison’s smile was already in place—polite, wounded.

“Mrs. Uppleger,” she said to Kelly. “Is all this necessary? I’ve already given my statement. Repeatedly.”

Kelly took the chair opposite her and set a thick file on the table, the sound of it landing sharper than anyone’s voice. “It is necessary,” Kelly said. “Because this time, we’re not here to ask what happened to your painting. We’re here to talk about what you did with it.”

A faint line appeared between Mrs. Ellison’s eyebrows. “I beg your pardon?”

Mimi stayed standing, a step to Kelly’s right, the same file mirrored in her hands. Amy and Kevin took the side wall, near the observation glass.

“You’ve portrayed yourself as the victim of a sophisticated theft,” Kelly said, keeping her tone calm. “But the evidence paints a different picture. One where you aren’t the victim at all.”

Mrs. Ellison’s smile cooled a fraction. “I’ve been more than cooperative. I—”

“You increased the insurance coverage on the painting,” Mimi cut in, flipping open her folder, “to two million dollars, just weeks before the gala. You signed the endorsement yourself. Your broker flagged the jump as unusual, but you insisted.”

“That’s not a crime,” Mrs. Ellison said. “I was advised the market value had changed. My late husband’s collection—”

“Then,” Mimi continued, “you quietly formed Ellison & Associates. No history, no prior projects, just a brand-new company with a development plan and projected costs that happen to align almost perfectly with that two-million payout.

Mrs. Ellison’s fingers tightened slightly, the only crack in her composure. “You’re making quite a leap, Ms.…?”

“Brown.” Mimi said. “And no. A leap would be assuming coincidence. What we have are connections. Your company’s financials show ‘anticipated funds’ in the high six figures, tagged with an active insurance claim. The same claim filed on your stolen painting.”

Kelly slid the police copy of the same document across the table, so it stopped in front of Mrs. Ellison. “You were planning how to spend the money before the painting ever left the wall.”

Mrs. Ellison didn’t look down. “I don’t handle every line item in my ventures. If there are projections, that is my adviser’s domain. Tyler—”

“Tyler Carrington,” Amy said quietly from the wall. “Your ‘adviser’ who just happened to have a full development blueprint for Ellison & Associates on his office desk the week before the gala. Same parcel referenced here, same budget, same timeline set to start as soon as the claim paid.”

Mrs. Ellison finally glanced at the paper, then up at Amy. “You had no right to go through his office.”

“We didn’t,” Amy said. “But the insurer did—in the course of checking for conflicts. And the metadata on his calendar shows a meeting blocked for the morning after the gala. You and Mr. Carrington. Labeled ‘finalization.’”

Kevin stepped forward, arms loosely folded. “Funny thing,” he said. “That meeting disappears from the calendar right after the theft hits the news. Like someone suddenly didn’t want a record of getting together to finalize anything.”

“This is absurd,” Mrs. Ellison said, but her voice had lost some of its velvet. “My meeting schedules, my business ventures—none of this proves anything about a theft I suffered.”

Kelly opened the main file and turned the page with deliberate care. “There’s more. Lab analysis on trace from the frame. High-end women’s lambskin gloves. Not exactly common, even in your circles. And the security footage from the gala shows your partner standing at the painting during the one window when the camera angle was blocked. Gloved hand on the frame.”

Mrs. Ellison’s eyes flicked, just once, toward the mirror. “You’re stretching fragmentary evidence into a narrative because you’re under pressure to close a case.”

“The narrative came from you,” Mimi said. “You needed the painting off your books and the policy liquid. So, you moved the original out of reach, staged a

theft, and turned its ‘loss’ into startup capital. Ellison & Associates doesn’t exist in spite of what happened at the gala. It exists because of it.”

Silence pooled in the room.

Mrs. Ellison gave a short, brittle laugh. “You honestly believe I masterminded a heist at my own charity event? Surrounded by cameras and witnesses? Do you have any idea how ridiculous that sounds?”

“It sounds efficient,” Amy said. “You controlled the guest list. You controlled the floor plan. You knew exactly when the cameras swept where. All you needed was a distraction at the right moment.”

“That is where Rowan came into play. You steered him into playing the charming fool so you could get every eye in the room off the wall and on him. That way you or your partner could finish the part you’d planned all along.” Kevin stated.

Kelly said. “Timing lines up. Coverage increases. New LLC. Development blueprint. Anticipated funds tied to the policy. Phone and email traffic between you and Carrington flagged as ‘investment discussion’ and ‘capital structure.’ Meeting scheduled for the morning after the theft. And then the physical evidence placing your inner circle at the exact point of access.”

Kelly let each piece land like a stone.

“This isn’t one coincidence,” Kelly said. “It’s a chain. And every link leads back to you.”

For the first time, Mrs. Ellison’s eyes hardened, the practiced grief slipping just a fraction. “So, what now?” she asked. “You expect a confession to complete your tidy story?”

“No,” Kelly said. “What happens now is simpler than that. You’re being informed that the investigation no longer treats you as a victim. You are now a suspect in an organized fraud and theft scheme.”

Mrs. Ellison’s chair scraped softly as she shifted, chin lifting. “You have no proof I ever laid a hand on that painting.”

“We don’t need to prove you physically lifted it,” Mimi said. “We need to show you arranged for it to disappear and financially positioned yourself to profit when it did. And that trail is in your own signatures, your emails, your companies.”

Amy stepped closer to the table, her voice steady. “You turned a piece you claimed to love into a funding mechanism. You didn’t lose it. You leveraged it.”

For a heartbeat, Mrs. Ellison said nothing. Her fingers drummed once on the steel, then stilled.

“When you walk out of here,” Kelly said, “you won’t be going back to your foundation. You’ll be going through processing. Your attorney can meet you there.”

Mrs. Ellison’s smile returned, but now it was sharp, almost amusing. “You mistake yourselves for the center of this story,” she said. “You’re not. You’re just the ones who got to it first.”

She rose slowly as the door opened and an officer stepped in with cuffs.

Mimi watched her stand, feeling the weight of the file ease just a little in her hands. “Maybe,” Mimi said. “But the story you wrote with this painting? This is where that one ends.”

Mrs. Ellison didn’t answer. She simply offered her wrists, perfectly composed, as the metal closed around them with a soft, final click.

Epilogue

The conference room looked different with pizza boxes on the table instead of case files.

The whiteboard, once crowded with timelines and arrows, now held only a single word in thick blue marker: CLOSED. Someone—probably Kevin—had added a lopsided little crown over it.

“Okay,” Kelly said, lifting a plastic cup of soda. “Before the grease sets into the laminate and Facilities yells at us, let’s make this quick. We did good.”

A chorus of agreement rolled around the table. Mimi leaned back in her chair, the tension finally unknotting from her shoulders. Amy sat with her laptop open, one earbud dangling, the other pressed in to catch the faint sound of coughing on the screen.

“Jaz? You still with us?” Amy asked, angling the device so everyone could see.

On the video call, Jazmyn lay propped up against pillows, a blanket tucked under her arms, hair messy and eyes bright despite the pallor. “Barely,” she croaked. “I think my immune system resigned in protest. But I am not missing this.”

Kevin grinned and raised his cup toward the screen. “To our fearless data sorceress, calling in from the land of cough syrup.”

“Data sorceress deserves better insurance,” Jazmyn muttered. “Do you have any idea how much sick days pay out? We should investigate—”

“No more fraud for at least forty-eight hours,” Mimi interrupted. “House rule.”

Laughter rippled around the table. Even Kelly smiled.

“All right,” Kelly said. “Here it is, officially. The DA filed this afternoon. Felony fraud, conspiracy, theft by deception. Mrs. Ellison’s attorney tried to float a ‘misunderstood investment’ narrative, but the paper trail you four built might as well be etched in stone.”

Amy exhaled slowly. “The insurer’s general counsel called me,” she said. “They’re freezing the payout, rescinding the claim, and reviewing every

policy tied to her network. They actually said thank you. Like, out loud. On purpose.”

“Careful,” Kevin said. “You keep getting that kind of reaction and they’ll ask you to teach a seminar.”

“On ‘How Not to Be Defrauded by People with Great Stationery’?” Amy said. “Hard pass.”

On the screen, Jazmyn shifted, pulling the blanket tighter. “You should’ve heard Claims when they looped me in,” she said. “They were so smug about their ‘high-profile client.’ And then bam—Mimi’s timeline, Amy’s metadata, Kevin’s interviewing catch, and Kelly’s ‘I’m not mad, just disappointed’ voice. Beautiful.”

Mimi shook her head, a smile tugging at her mouth. “It wasn’t just me.”

“Darn right it wasn’t,” Jazmyn said. She lifted a mug from her bedside table in a half-toast. “This was all of us.”

Kelly tapped the table with two fingers. “Let’s do this properly. Round the room. One thing you’re proud of. It doesn’t have to be big. Just… name it.”

Kevin groaned theatrically. “Feelings. You didn’t say there would be feelings.”

“Kevin,” Kelly warned, but the edge was gone from her tone.

“Fine, fine.” He thought for a moment. “I’m proud I listened when Mimi said something was off about the timing instead of assuming it was just rich-people weirdness. I was… not as helpful at that gala as I thought I was.”

“You were helpful,” Mimi said. “Just in a way Mrs. Ellison didn’t intend.”

Kevin clutched his chest. “Redemption. I’ll take it.”

“Amy?” Kelly asked.

Amy glanced at the laptop, then back at the table. “I’m proud we didn’t let the ‘victim’ label blind us. It’s easy to stop asking questions once someone starts crying in front of a camera. We pushed past that. We found the story under the story.”

Jazmyn snapped her fingers on-screen. “That’s going on the wall,” she said. “Right under CLOSED.”

“Mimi?” Kelly said.

Mimi hesitated, fingers tracing the edge of her cup. “I’m proud we put the money at the center,” she said. “Insurance fraud is… quiet. It’s not dramatic like a break-in or a chase. But it hurts people. Policyholders, employees, charities that never see promised funds. We followed the numbers, and the numbers told the truth, and that truth mattered.”

Kelly nodded once, approving. “Jaz?”

Jazmyn sniffed, partly from the cold and partly from emotion. “I’m proud I got to swing from home base,” she said. “Logs, call records, systems—my stuff. I didn’t have to be in the room to be in the room, you know? And I’m proud of all of you for trusting a spreadsheet more than a designer scarf.”

Everyone chuckled.

Heads turned to Kelly.

“And you?” Mimi asked. “Boss doesn’t get to skip.”

Kelly looked at each of them in turn, then at the word on the whiteboard.

“I’m proud you didn’t take the easy ending,” she said. “We could’ve filed this as an unsolved theft with a sad rich benefactor and moved on. You refused. You kept digging until you found the person actually writing the script. That’s the kind of thing that changes how people see this work.”

A comfortable quiet settled over them.

Outside the windows, the city glowed—the kind of early evening where office towers reflected a sky still not entirely willing to let go of the day.

“So,” Kevin said. “Is this where we talk about ‘what we learned’ and ‘how we’ll grow’ and all that?”

“This is where we talk about pizza,” Jazmyn said. “Someone show me the table. I want to judge your choices.”

Amy rotated the laptop, so the camera caught the spread. “We’ve got pepperoni, veggie, something Kevin swears is authentic Neapolitan, and a suspicious white one.”

“White pizza?” Jazmyn gasped. “Who ordered betrayal?”

“Hey,” Kevin protested. “That’s art.”

“You lost your right to use that word after the gala,” Amy said.

Mimi laughed, the sound lighter than she’d expected it to be. “Next time,” she said, “we solve a case that doesn’t involve gala food or evening gloves.”

“Next time,” Jazmyn said, “I am not getting sick. I want to be there when the crown gets drawn on the board.”

“You can draw it now,” Amy said. “Screen-share. Do your worst.”

On the call, Jazmyn fiddled with her tablet, and a moment later the whiteboard feed blinked onto the screen. Using her finger, she sketched a new crown—bigger, wobblier, with far too many points.

“There,” she said. “Officially extra.”

Kevin squinted at it. “It’s crooked.”

“It’s earned,” Mimi said.

Kelly let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. “Enjoy this,” she told them. “Tomorrow, something else lands on the board. It always does.”

“And we’ll handle it,” Amy said.

“Together,” Jazmyn added.

Kevin raised his cup again. “To together, then. And to catching the people everyone else calls untouchable.”

They all echoed the toast, even Jazmyn through her cough.

For a moment, the room held only small sounds: the rustle of cardboard, the clink of plastic against plastic, the faint digital delay of Jazmyn’s laughter bleeding through tiny speakers. No evidence. No timelines. Just a team sitting in the aftermath of a win that had cost them sleep and doubt and a little bit of innocence.

Mimi looked at the word on the board one more time.

CLOSED.

Not because the painting had vanished, but because the truth had finally come into focus.

“Okay,” she said softly, more to herself than anyone else. “On to the next story.”

No one argued.